DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 274 781 CE 045 094

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TITLE Generativity in Middle Adulthood.
PUB DATE Oct 86
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the National Adult Education Conference (Hollywood, FL, October 1986). Excerpted from an Ed.D. dissertation, Northern Illinois University.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Development; Adult Education; Educational Needs; *Middle Aged Adults; *Midlife Transitions; Postsecondary Education; *Psychological Characteristics; *Self Actualization
IDENTIFIERS *Generativity

ABSTRACT

The study described in this paper was conducted to delineate the phenomenon of generativity in middle-aged adults in an attempt to identify its major characteristics, attributes, determinants, and situational or circumstantial variables. Three themes emerged from a literature survey of materials on middle adulthood: the theme of the entry experience, sometimes described as a crisis; the theme of the tasks for this period; and the theme of successful and unsuccessful negotiations in and through this stage. There were 13 study participants, 7 male and 6 female, ranging in age from 41 to 77 and in income levels from $5,000 to more than $100,000 per year, representing various ethnic backgrounds and religious traditions. These individuals were interviewed in depth and observed using the paradigm of phenomenology to perceive and describe generativity as evidenced in their lives. Three general categories of generativity were found: roots of generativity, transition experiences, and maturing generativity. Five conclusions emerged: (1) childhood experiences are not necessarily predictive of adult generative behavior; (2) maturing generativity looks fairly homogeneous; (3) generativity is triggered by a pivotal event; (4) women function as a catalyst for significant others; and (5) the quality of caring essential to generativity includes suffering and joy. (KC)

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GENERATIVITY IN MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

Excerpts From A Dissertation (1985) Study

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INTRODUCTION

The compelling issue of a greatly extended life time for most adults brings with it a sense of urgency which has never faced humanity before. Currently the issue of life extension is fraught with fears and questions. What does it mean to be old? What is it like to be on the way to growing old, to be in middle life, young no longer, but certainly not yet old? Jung (1933) decried the absence of preparation for people as they embark on the second half of life. Uninformed, they often make choices which contribute to their becoming "hypochondriacs, niggards, doctrinaires, applauders of the past or eternal adolescents" (p. 109).

Generativity

Respected theorists on the development of the adult personality over time such as Erikson (1950), Jung (1933), Maslow (1962), Ortega y Gasset (1969) and Vaillant (1977), have posited that adulthood is a time of continuous change. Generativity emerged as an important concept in adult developmental theory in 1950 when Erikson published his seminal work on human development from birth to death. Erikson (1950) posits three concepts: (a) development is psychosocial, in that the individual must establish new basic orientations to both the self and the social world; (b) personality development continues throughout the whole life cycle; and (c) each stage involves choice, and thus it has positive as well as negative components. Adulthood is broken into three periods: early, middle, and

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late. The middle of life is that nebulous time between youth and old age to which researchers assign various ages. The life task in middle adulthood, according to Erikson, is the choice between generativity or self-absorption which leads to either hope or despair in old age.

Through his concept of generativity in middle adulthood, Erikson points to the phenomenon experienced as the person begins to be concerned with others beyond the immediate family, with future generations and the nature of the society and the world in which those generations will live. The cultivation of generativity and the development of its associated virtue, caring, paves the way for a useful and rewarding future while at the same time avoiding self-absorption and its companion, stagnation.

Purpose

Currently there is a lack of understanding about what generativity in middle adulthood might mean. The purpose of this study was to better delineate the phenomenon of generativity in an attempt to identify or operationalize its major characteristics, attributes, determinants, situational or circumstantial variables. Without clearer understandings, needed articulation of the choices inherent in middle adulthood and the consequences of those choices are hindered. The decisions of middle adulthood affect not only individual lives but the larger society of which they are a part. Unfortunately only a small proportion of the human population attains much of the personal growth which is their potential. Maslow (1971) laments "We have the impulse toward full development.... Why doesn't it happen more often? What blocks it?" (p. 26).

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE ON MIDDLE ADULTHOOD

Although developmental aspects of adulthood have gained increasing attention over the past 40 years, the notion that adults develop and change over time has roots in ancient sources like Confucius, Solomon, and the Talmudic writers. Important contributors to the theory of adult development in the 20th century include: Buhler, Erikson, Fowler, Gilligan, Gould, Jung, Keen, Kohlberg, Levinson, Neugarten, Orgega y Gasset, Sheehy, Vaillant, and Whitehead and Whitehead.

Three themes emerged from the literature as compelling in middle adulthood: the theme of the entry experience, sometimes described as a crisis; the theme of the tasks for this period; and the theme of successful and unsuccessful negotiations in and through this stage. These three themes were viewed from three aspects: psychological, social, and spiritual. Finally, the review concluded with literature on Erikson's construct of generativity.

Because the concept of adult development has been explored in many settings and professions such as sociology, psychology, literature, and religion, the literature can seem disjointed and conflictual. For example psychological research concerns itself with the inner personality, while social theorists are concerned with the interaction of the self with society. Vaillant (1977) and Knox (1978) encourage a more wholistic view of adulthood.

Most available research has been done on small, non-random, homogeneous, male samples. Levinson's (1978) work using 40 males is an example of this and does not warrant the degree of generalization to other situations which have occurred. Women researchers like Baruch et al. (1983) and Gilligan (1982) are challenging such theorists because they found their

models ineffective when applied to women's experience.

When looking specifically at Erikson's complex theories it is evident that they have been often quoted and oversimplified. The concept of generativity has not been well conceptualized and is only supported by a modest empirical base. In spite of these negative aspects, generativity seems to be an alluring concept with some face validity. The notion of generativity versus stagnation captures at least intuitively, some essential quality of middle adulthood.

METHODOLOGY

After careful consideration, it was decided that the phenomenological paradigm would be most appropriate in obtaining the kind of data capable of adding to the research base on generativity. Phenomenology is a qualitative research model which is exploratory and discovery oriented and its methods attempt to study human experience as it is lived out in normal daily activity. Phenomenology also recognizes the value of a number of people subjectively concurring (Zaner, 1970); this agreement from multiple individual realities is known as intersubjectivity or confirmability (Guba, 1978). It follows then that the intersubjectively agreed-upon issue or aspect is in all probability trustworthy (Guba, 1978).

Sample

For this study, participants were selected through the process of confirmability, as having something to contribute. There was no special effort made to choose study participants with any particular mix of sex or background; yet, as the selection process progressed, a diversified mixture naturally occurred. There were 13 participants, 7 male and 6 female. They

ranged in age from 41 to 77 and in income levels from $5,000 to over $100,000 annually. Various ethnic backgrounds including Jewish, Black, and Anglo-Saxon were represented, as were different religious traditions including Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Ecumenical.

These individuals were interviewed in depth and observed using the paradigm of phenomenology to perceive and describe the complex phenomenon of generativity as evidenced in their lives. Tapes of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the combination of a constant comparative method with phenomenology. From this process, catagories descriptive of the phenomenon were inductively derived.

FINDINGS

The findings on generativity in middle adulthood can be presented in three general categories: (a) roots of generativity, (b) transition experiences, and (c) maturing generativity.

Roots of Generativity

Because caring is the predominant virtue associated with generativity, it was of particular interest to trace elements of caring in the formative events of the lives of participants. Three subthemes emerged when considering the roots of caring, they were: participants all experienced being cared for in childhood, they observed caring for others as they matured, and they had difficulties in childhood which fostered an empathic quality.

Sources of Caring in Childhood

Even though all participants could recall experiences of caring, there was a wide variety in the sources for caring. Some found much caring in

their family of origin. One woman who was born into a black family over 60 years ago, spoke of her feeling of being loved even though they were poor and there were 12 children:

> I had a father I could be proud of even though he was only a common laborer. He could sing; he was very talented. My parents were together 54 years; ...they gave us good lessons. My mother took in laundry to help. We knew we were loved. We were punished when we did wrong, but somehow you got the message--you are loved!

Other participants spoke of home environments which containes a mixture of caring and hurtful behaviors. A man shared: "My family, especially my mother, was a social climber and persona oriented, always interested in how the family looked to outsiders." He also acknowledged: "I grew up in a very generous environment. My father was a really generous person; he gave of himself."

A third type of home environment which participants experienced was mainly negative, and the individuals suffered and sought support elswhere. One woman, an artist, shared that as a child she was very withdrawn. She had "...a rather dangerous mother, she had no boundaries, ...mother was jealous [of me]." A dentist spoke of his father: "I hated my dad, he was too busy. He just didn't have time for us".

Study participants spoke of finding caring from grandparents, other relatives, or teachers. For example, the dentist who hated his father had a beloved grandpa: "I had a grandpa who was one of the greatest. He gave me the sense of being a kid and the joy of life!"

Models of Caring for Others

In addition to the caring received, participants had caring for those beyond the home modeled for them. One example of this comes from a man, born in 1907 of newly immigrated parents. He spoke of the pattern of giving as set in his youth. In spite of modest circumstances, "Dad put money out for others. It is a tradition of our people that you take care of those who are less well-to-do". Many of the models were positive examples of tangible giving. But there were other models, negative models of prejudice and lack of respect for those who were different. These negative models outraged participants and formed lasting impressions which contributed to their caring activities later in life..

Childhood Difficulties Which Fostered Empathy

The final theme in this section on the roots of generativity is, participants had childhood difficulties which fostered an empathic quality. Some of these childhood difficulties rose out of racial prejudice or poverty, oters from physical handicaps, parental inadequacies, or other painful life events. A few illustrative examples include: a musician who was blinded in an accident at age three; a businessman felt like a victim all of his childhood and adolescence because he was inept physically and other children taunted him. An author had serious birth trauma, was a "blue baby" and had brain and hearing damage. A business woman lost her mother to cancer when she was 18, and another participant had to stay out of school because she did not have a pair of shoes to wear. These experiences of hardship and suffering fostered an empathic quality in participants.

Transition Experiences

Somewhere in life, most likely in the age 40 decade (it has

occurred in adolescence for a few), a transition time beckoned study participants. The transition period was at times a dramatic event and at times a gentle unfolding, but after it was negotiated successfully, individuals could look back on transition experiences and see the shape of them. They could also see threads reaching back into early life, which in retrospect were viewed as preparation events for the transition. The transition time had three components, the pivotal event, a sense of calling and recognition of risks and consequences.

Pivotal Event

This transition time was launched by a pivotal event such as a personal or family crisis, or some other major dilemma. One example of a pivotal event came from a man whose college age daughter wanted to take a trip which her parents did not think was right for her. In order to divert his daughter's attention, he decided to take a medical tour to a Third World country, sponsored by his professional association, and invite her to join him. He said of the trip: "I was so impressed with the way she worked--it brings tears to my eyes. She was patting heads, holding hands, blood everywhere..." Because of the problem with his daughter, he was, in his words, "backed into it [giving generatively], but I tell you, it was the most thrilling experience of my life!" It was the beginning of many years of donating his time, money and expertise to needy clinics abroad.

Sense of Calling

After negotiating the pivotal event, and as a continuing part of that, a sense of call developed. This sense of call was a compelling urge toward expressions of caring. A business man exclaimed "I couldn't do anything else--you had to say yes!" Another spoke of his vocation: "It's

chosen me, I almost feel as though I have no alternative!" Another man who mediates between peoples in the Middle East and elsewhere spoke of his sense of calling; "You just have to do it. You commit yourself to something if you have any sense of honor at all".

Recognition of Risks and Consequences

Eventually study participants found that they were led out of the safe, culturally defined roles into new territory. One woman who returned to school and became a Presbyterian minister spoke of things "being scarier,...it's newer ground for me. Now I am a woman pastor and a lot of people don't know what to do with me." She noted that her husband used to approve of her role in the home with the children. It was a "neat little package" but now there is a strain on this primary relationship.

A businessman who was president of a multi-national company told of some of the risks in his transition experience. He quit his prestigious position at age 53 to become a full-time volunteer. He stated:

> I knew that I was right on the edge of the highest earning period of my life, but in spite of my [materialistic] sense of values developed in the depression, it was of no consequence that I was giving up that kind of money.

Instead, he put into form a tender idea which could facilitate the starting of small cottage industries in Third World countries. Now, his idea is responsible for starting over 2,000 small businesses, but in the beginning he did not know whether it would work or not, as he said "It was only an idea..."

Others spoke of some consequences of their generative activities "I

would like not to have to be way out there. I get lots of flack and people don't like me." Another observed "Stepping out of culturally defined behaviors--it's a risk--it requires a high degree of faith."

Maturing Generativity

World View

Over time the process of maturing generativity developed more fully in participants. Four components of maturing generativity emerged, the first included the formation of a view of the world which supported the individual's life experiences. It also formed a structure from which to understand the polarities in life, the creative and the destructive, which were inherent in themselves and the outer world. Those in maturing generativity had a world view which left agnosticism behind and embraced a deep commitment to the spiritual aspects of life. They recognized the oneness of all creation under God, that all peoples are God's children and therefore brothers and sisters.

A few brief comments express a bit of the world view which participants had formed. A Jewish man stated:"The Almighty has a way of looking after you." A Protestant woman noted: "It's everything, the Higher Power I connect with." Another who sees himself as Ecumenical affirmed: "I'm on a journey with God. I want to please God. I know I have been gifted."

Caring Behavior and Its Rewards

Rewards for the expansion of caring behaviors was the second component in maturing generativity. Persons found themselves reaping rewards which contained both suffering and joy.

Joy included a zest for life, a gathering of wisdom and an

unshakable sense of personal value and meaning. Generative persons clearly enjoyed the challenge of their chosen activities. One stated his philosophy: "It's therapeutic to give. It's been the most fulfilling part of my life--the most fulfilling part!" Another comment from a former jet setter:

> There is an intrinsic joy in making generative moves which comes out of our inner soul. I am so much happier doing generative things. It's a satisfying way of life. I could not go back to golf and to making money.

Another of the rewards of maturing generativity was that generative persons found each other and became the network of caring support for one another which was needed to continue in the work which had come to them.

The painful elements included caring to the point of risking personal convenience, safety, finances, and the misunderstanding of significant others in the fulfillment of caring activities. One man tried to describe some of the pain he feels when he takes groups of people to Central America in order to raise their awareness of the real problems there. When he sees the victimization of human beings, particularly "the little children, it just breaks your heart", he said with tears in his eyes.

Self-Understanding

The third factor in maturing generativity was the ongoing process of self-understanding. Elements of self-understanding included something of how study participants integrated their backgrounds, their mistakes, their successes. Evidence of the integration process emerged from the interviews

in comments like this: "I've had to forgive mother; I feel quite healed" and, "I always said I'll never be the kind of father my father was to me--and, of course, when I grew up, I was. That was my patterning. I've had to forgive him."

Self-understanding also includes awareness of personal limitations. Learning to value and respect themselves in spite of the fact that they are limited in what they can accomplish is vital to maturing generativity. In fact, persons maturing in generativity understand that they can only love another in healthy ways if they respect and love themselves in healthy ways, thus they are never martyrs or do-gooders. In self-understanding there was the ongoing process of awareness of value shifts. This could include a simplification of the material side of life, an increased pleasure in and respect for nature, and the desire for time alone to think, to be quiet, and to meditate.

Hopes and dreams were the fourth component in the generative personality. There was an attitude of hope in the future in spite of reports of gloom and doom. Study participants had many dreams, playful dreams, serious dreams, dreams for service, for themselves, their loved ones, and their planet home.

Conclusions

Five conclusions emerged from the findings. They were: (a) childhood experiences are not necessarily predictive of adult generative behavior, (b) maturing generativity looks fairly homogeneous, (c) generativity is triggered by a pivotal event, (d) women function as a catalyst for significant others, and (e) the quality of caring essential to generativity includes suffering and joy.

Implications for Adult Educators

Adult educators practice in a field that has long been concerned with the growth and development of individuals. They could become an important key to facilitating adults toward generativity by increasing their own understanding, awareness and knowledge of the middle years. The following discussion focuses on three challenges for adult educators.

Challenge one: How can adult educators promote the prospects of fostering generativity in themselves and in others during middle adulthood? Generativity needs to receive some visibility. Perhaps adult educators could begin to highlight the benefits of generativity both personally and societally. Another way might be to highlight generativity's counterparts, self-absorption and stagnation. Images of negative aging in Vaillant's (1977) work alone are impressive. His Worst Outcomes (non-generative) group had more career problems, little evidence of friends, high use of alcohol and/or tranquilizers, more evidence of psychopathology, more marital struggles, inability to help children start life well, more chronic physical problems in middle years, more loneliness and deaths than his Best Outcomes (generative) group.

Challenge two: How can adult eduators facilitate adults' ability to design and consciously shape their lives toward fulfilling their creative potential? There are at least two ways to address this challenge: one is through the personal model which the educator provides, and the other is though programming designed to facilitate growth and development in adulthood. Questions arise: How does one fulfill both personal and professional levels of generative behaviors? What would a generative adult educator look like? What impact could such an educator make that is not

being made now?

Challenge three: How can adult educators design ways to harness the quality of generativity as a resource for facing the social challenges of today? Boshier (1981) warns that the problems of planet earth are matters of life and death. There is a need for an informed and generative citizenry who can participate in needed social interventions. Basic human needs can be fulfilled only by and through other human beings. Adult educators need to consider the power they have to model and teach in a practical way, the spiritual, ethical, and moral values which are the common ground of all religions and without which, according to Erikson (1982), generativity cannot flourish.

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